

PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN THEIR CHILDREN'S SPORTS CLUBS

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Abstract

The aim of this research project was, firstly, to gain an insight into the number of parents involved in the sports clubs of their children, and secondly, to find out whether the sports clubs are satisfied with the way in which the parents are involved. Surveys were sent to 486 sports clubs in the Netherlands. From the 171 clubs who returned the questionnaires, 76.7% were not pleased with the number of parents involved in the sports club. Furthermore, in 53% of the cases they were not happy at all with the way in which the parents were involved. However, clubs do not have a policy concerning the enhancement and quality improvement of parental involvement. From qualitative interviews with the parents, Board members, and coaches in 12 clubs it can however be concluded that parents are willing to fulfil some duties in the sports club, but they say that they were not asked to do so by the Board members.

Key words: sports club, parental participation, policy, interviews

Zusammenfassung:

DIE TEILNAHME DER ELTERN AN DEN SPORTKLUBS IHRER KINDER

Das Ziel dieser Studie war, Einsicht in die Zahl der Eltern zu gewähren, die in die Sportklubs ihrer Kinder aktiv eingeschlossen sind sowie herauszufinden, ob die Sportklubs mit der Art und Weise der Elternteilnahme zufrieden sind. Die Fragebogen wurden an 486 Sportklubs in der Niederlande abgesendet. Von den 171 Klubs, die geantwortet haben, sind 76,7% mit der Zahl der eingeschlossenen Eltern nicht zufrieden. Weiterhin sind die Klubs in 53% der Fälle mit der Art und Weise der Elternteilnahme höchst unzufrieden. Es gibt jedoch keine Klubspolitik bezüglich der Vergrößerung und Verbesserung der Elternteilnahme. Andererseits haben die Interviews mit den Eltern, Klubsleitungsmitgliedern und Trainern in 12 Klubs gezeigt, daß die Eltern bereit sind, einige Dienste in den Klubs zu erfüllen, aber daß sie angeblich von der Klubleitung dazu nicht eingeladen worden sind.

Schlüsselwörter: Sportklub, Elternteilnahme, Politik, Interviews

Introduction

Little interest of the parents, low parental participation, sports clubs having the feeling of being used as a crèche, a shortage of executives and volunteers, ... these are some of the problems the average sports club more or less has to deal with. Clubs that want to do something about it, appreciate information and support. That is why the Dutch Cultural Sports Association (NCS) and the NCSU, two sister sports organizations that noticed these problems, wanted to do something about them and started the project "The Family and The Sports Club" (NCSU, NCS & NKS, 1992). The project was started with the aim of "making sports accessible to everyone". This means that they wanted to engage as many people as possible in sports, either as participants or as directors, executives, coaches or

volunteers. The project has two more specific aims:

1. to increase the involvement of parents in the sports club;
2. to solve the shortage of executives in the clubs.

The NCS and the NCSU are of the opinion that sports should not be an activity by itself, but an integrated part of our society. Society is becoming more individualistic in different areas; this is also revealed in sports. The sports club in general is suffering, due to the loss of members and the decrease of interest to participate within the club. By involving the whole family the NCS and the NCSU are hoping to increase the attractiveness of the club, to improve the participation of parents and hopefully also to resolve the lack or the shortage of volunteers.

Consequently a plan which would help realize these goals was developed and offered to the clubs. Our tasks were to answer the following questions:

1. "What is the relationship between the sports club and the family at this moment?"
2. "How can this relationship be enhanced and improved?"

Research review

The sports club

In today's society sport has an important role. The number of participants is still growing. According to data from NOC*NSF (the Dutch Olympic Committee and the Dutch Sports Association) there were 4.4 million organized participants in 1996, that is sports participants who are members of a national sports association. Besides this there are two other forms of sports participation, namely the variously organized sports participation (community clubs, youth clubs, sport schools, ...) and the unorganized sports participation (jogging, swimming, walking, ...). These kinds of sports are the most accessible. The advantage is that you do not have to be a member to practise sport. The NOC*NSF estimates that 2.5 million people engage in these forms of sports participation (NOC*NSF, 1994).

Traditionally the sports club is the place to engage in sports. Crum (1991) notes that traditional club sports has become less evident than 25 years ago. People who practised sports automatically joined a club. Now people can choose from a range of variously organized forms of sport. These forms are more flexible, demand less of the members and adjust better to the consumer. This in contrast to a sports club, where the consumer has to adjust himself/herself and where a certain devotion to the club is expected.

There are many ways of being engaged in sports but the importance of the club life can hardly be underestimated. The traditional sports club - characterized by voluntary work, self-activity, internal democracy, acceptance of responsibility, upholding agreements, meeting the young

and the old, and solidarity - was and in many cases still is a stronghold of social integration (Crum, 1991). Club sports in the Netherlands largely still depends on volunteers. About 66% of the clubs has to cope with executive problems (Manders & Kropman, 1977) and the question is whether the clubs have to change to professionals in order to solve their executive problems.

Child development

The transmitting of standards and values is seen as the most important function of the family. In this way, culture is preserved and transmitted from one generation to the next (Collins, 1985). The present culture is, however, so complex that parents have to make choices regarding the things they want their children to learn and they have to plan it in such a way that the child can process it. Institutions, which are specialized in this, play an important role here. A good example of an institution that has taken over the tasks regarding the education of children is the teaching institution. The cognitive and part of the social education of children in the family is supported by the teachers at school.

Another institution that is taking over a part of the education of children is the sports club. Parents are indeed not capable anymore of giving their children a full education regarding physical exercise. The sports clubs nowadays have slowly taken over this task of the family.

Parents can support education by letting their child participate in a certain sport within a sports club. Children younger than ever before are engaged in sports. The sports club is sometimes called the "third education environment". Besides in the family and at school children can learn in their sports club how to behave themselves in social life. They can learn to keep to rules, be responsible and work in a team (Stokvis, 1989).

An important factor determining the sports participation of children is the process of socialization, where individuals acquire skills, standards, values, attitudes and knowledge about the existing or anticipated social roles. It is a kind of social learning, where the two forms can be distinguished:

1. socialization in social roles: e.g. as a child you are taught to take on the role of sports person or consumer;
2. socialization via social roles: e.g. by means of sport one learns certain things, such as discipline, team spirit or perseverance (Smoll, 1988).

In the first form of socialization parents play an important role. Research indicates that the family has the earliest and most dominant influence on the sports participation of children. Especially in the process of the beginning of sports participation parents play a central role and will continue to stimulate their children to go to a sports club. The socialization influence of the family starts in the early childhood (Smoll, 1988). Parents also play a significant role in supporting the child's participation in a particular sport. But other researchers (Greendorfer, 1977; Smoll, 1988; Cole & Cole, 1993) claim that the older the children, the more prominent the role of their contemporaries (peer group) and of coaches/teachers. This can be explained by the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, namely by adolescence.

Regarding the second form of socialization via sport parents often have a fixed opinion. There is the image that through the participation in a certain sport children can learn all kinds of things they could use in their future lives. Sport is often seen as a way of building the character of a sports person. Coakley (1990) on the other hand gives three reasons why people should not overemphasize the character-building aspect of sport:

1. There is a kind of natural selection in sports. A child is selected because he/she has certain characteristics, which are often already present in the child instead of being developed through sport;
2. People put too much stress on top-sports persons being used as examples. They do not look at those who did not make it;
3. Parents attribute characteristics to sports participation, but they could as well have been learnt somewhere else.

The relationship between the coach and the parents influences the sports practice of

the children. De Cuyper and Vanden Auweele (s.d.) showed that a good relationship between the parents and the coach decreases the risk of dropping out of the club early. Especially in top sports there are often tensions between the opinions of the coaches and those of the parents.

The fact that the sports club is seen as a third education environment and that children join the club ever younger means that the pedagogic responsibility of the sports club increases. Therefore it is recommended that parents should be involved in the clubs of their children. However, a (large) parental participation in the sports club of their children can be a problem too. In the average sports club the coach sometimes has to cope with "problem parents". De Knop (1992) distinguishes the following types of parents:

1. uninterested parents: they are never present at the sporting activity;
2. overcritical parents: they are never satisfied with the achievements of their child or the way of coaching;
3. parents yelling from the sideline: they are very near and they often shout louder than the coaches;
4. coaching from the sideline: they mostly give their instructions during the game; they can contradict the directions of the coach and this can cause confusion for the child;
5. overconcerned parents: they are afraid of the dangers of sport and threaten to take their child out of the sports club.

Method

Subjects and sample

In order to answer the question "What is the relationship between the sports club and the family at this moment?" half-structured questionnaires were used. First, questionnaires were sent to 486 sports clubs in the Netherlands. These included individual sports (martial arts and swimming) as well as team sports (football, korfbal, handball).

In order to be selected, the clubs had to fulfil the following condition: 40% or

more of the total number of members had to be youth members (up to 18 years old). This was to ensure that the clubs could be labelled as youth-oriented.

On the basis of the answered questionnaires two clubs were selected for each sport: one where they are satisfied with the parent participation and another one where they are not satisfied with the parent participation. In order to make this selection, questions were asked whether the club is satisfied with the attendance and the fulfilment of tasks by parents and whether the club is satisfied with the number of parents and the way they participate in the club. The clubs who clearly distinguished themselves on these four questions, were considered for the interviews.

In total, twelve clubs were interviewed, two per sport. In each club four interviews were held: with an executive, a coach, a father and a mother of a young member. A condition for the parents was that one parent has a child of 13 years and older and the other parent has children younger than 13. This condition was added because there could be a difference between the involvement of parents in the different age groups.

Design and development of instruments / interviews

There were three versions for the half-structured interview (parents, coach, executive). A list was made with standard questions and some points of attention which had to be prominent in each interview. For each interview a list was made with the points for analyzing. These are the categories which more or less are the possible answers.

A number of test interviews were done. On the one hand this was an interview training and on the other hand it was a way to check the instruments so they could eventually be adjusted.

Execution

The interviews were done by three persons. All three of them had the same interview training. The interviews were recorded and typed afterwards. The interviews were analyzed on the basis of the points of analysis. The first analysis was the placing of the citations within the answering

categories. This was done for each interview at a time. Then at a certain point of analysis all the interviews were considered and the conclusions were drawn.

Results

From the 171 clubs who returned the questionnaires 76.7% were not pleased with the number of parents involved in the sports club (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage of clubs that are pleased with the number of parents involved

Satisfied	Percentage of clubs %
yes	23.3%
no	76.7%

Furthermore, 53.0% of the sports clubs were not happy with the way in which parents participate (as shown in Table 2).

Table 2: Percentage of clubs that are happy with the way in which parents participate

Satisfied	Percentage of clubs %
yes	47%
no	53%

This means that clubs want to have more parents involved in the sports club of their children and they want the parents to participate more intensively. Sports clubs do not report many problems with regard to parents, except with divorced parents. These parents indeed very often contradict each other so that one week their children are allowed to come to the sports club and the other week they are not (when they stay with the other parent).

Clubs report that parents have a general say in matters, although in 96% of the cases they are not allowed to vote.

Table 3: The right of involvement and voting of parents

	A general say in matters	Right to vote
yes	70.6%	4.0%
no	29.4%	96.0%

In most cases no special activities are set up or policy matters taken up to involve parents (as shown in Table 4).

Table 4: Activities and policy matters for parental involvement

	yes	no
Existence of a parent committee	2.0%	98.0%
Special info-evenings for parents	11.9%	88.1%
Social activities for parents	35.0%	65.0%
Sport activities for parents	8.1%	91.9%

Opinions of parents

Parents about sport

For the interviewed families sport is important in general, especially for children. The most important reason is fun, but also health, physical development and social contact. The parents have an influence on the children regarding their choice of sports. The children choose their sport themselves, but the parents influence their choice. They take the children to their own sports club or to the club the older children are in. But the choice is above all influenced by friends. The school can also have an impact on the choice of children by practicing some sports a lot, especially in high schools.

Parents about the sports club

The social aspect of sport can be a reason to choose a sports club instead of another way of doing sports such as in commercial sports centres. In their choice of clubs the image of the club plays an important role. Parents are told by others what a good club it is. An important aspect of the image of the club is that people are good with children and that the club does a lot for children. The strengths of the club are a good organization and a good atmosphere within the club. The club is often chosen because it is close to the home and because friends are already members.

About half of the parents find it very important that there are professional coaches in the club, especially for individual sports, and they are prepared to pay an additional contribution. Those who do not want to pay more, feel that the atmosphere within the club will be influenced by the presence of a professional coach and that this is not necessary for the present level of the club. They think that a professional coach is only useful at a high level. However, a professional coach can give the attention adjusted to the right level.

Involvement of the parents

Parents are interested in their child and in this way they are involved in the club. A lot of the interviewed parents come to watch the competitions and some of them sometimes the training sessions. These parents are willing to help when something has to be done, but they do not fulfil any real function within the club. Almost all of the parents think the children find their involvement in the sport positive. The parents think the children like it when they come to watch the games. In a few families the children do not like it at all. They are in puberty and want to disconnect themselves from their parents. In most cases the parents stay involved but do not come to watch very often. However, they usually keep up their interest.

It is striking that about three quarters of the interviewed parents feel they are obliged to do something for the club of their children or at least show interest in the club. Clubs should always be able to call on a large part of the parents, but those parents especially want to do tasks which do not cost a lot of time and which are not frequent. If there are parents who want to put a little more time in the club, they usually do not want any executive or technical function because they think they have too little knowledge.

Parents like doing something for the club and certainly do not want to be paid. Some parents appreciate a little consideration for the volunteers or a special party being organized. It is important that the club organizes something for the parents. Parents regularly want to receive information about what is happening in the club and how their children are doing.

Opinions of coaches and executives

From the interviews it became clear that the interest of parents with younger children is higher than those with older children. Anyway, the interest decreases as the children grow older. The reasons can be that when children are young everything is new, and as they grow older the interest wears off. Parents know what is happening and come less frequently to watch. Also the children become more independent and want to disconnect themselves from the parents.

There is clearly a difference between the parents of the older and of the younger children, but from the interviews no difference in interest between the fathers and mothers was discovered.

Measurements undertaken to improve the relationship with the parents

Only three clubs actively contact parents in order to improve the relationship. One club has actually defined its points of action. They try to explain to the parents the operation of the club, the policy, the selection of the teams, etc. Other clubs request parents to come and watch or let coaches visit the parents for an informal conversation. Some clubs organize family days or competitions with parents in order to involve the parents in the club.

A number of clubs passively work on the improvement of the parent relationship by organizing parent and/or information evenings.

Regarding executive recruitment six clubs have some kind of active policy. Most of them try to recruit by personally approaching people. A great number of clubs do it in a passive way, e.g. an advertisement in the club magazine or distribution of photocopied pamphlets. According to different directors this is not the right way; approaching the parents personally seems to work better.

Discussion

The club

It is important to consider that every club is different. Also the solutions to problems must be looked for in each club separately. However, there are some matters to be pointed out that can be found in almost every club. These are the starting points of this conclusion.

Apart from the forms of sport practised a club is more a social setting where things are done together to make a cosy atmosphere and to keep one's head above water. This social aspect must be expanded. Crum (1991) indicates that the social integration in a club is typical for sports within a club compared with variously organized forms of sport. This is a matter the sports club has to address, because here they distinguish themselves.

This also means that the club should not only deal with competitive sports but also with recreational sports. Most of the clubs are in the competitive sports with regard to the youth. In a lot of clubs the competitive teams get most of the attention. It would be better if the 'smaller' teams also got a lot of attention from good coaches. Motivating children is one of the most important tasks of a coach for youth. This is especially important for the less good players, otherwise they are lost for the club and the sports.

Clubs should think about offering this group something else - a game form where the achievement is not so important, but where the playing of the game itself is more important. Especially for adults or adolescents who are no longer interested in competitions there is a need for a recreational form of playing. Clubs can often keep their members by offering a larger range of sporting activities that are adjusted to different age groups, wishes and abilities. Maybe clubs could cooperate on this matter. In the interviews it became clear that clubs see each other more as competitors than as allies. It would have a positive result if clubs would work together more often.

Most clubs do not have any policy whatsoever. Their policy is that agreements are embodied, the spearheads of that year are fixed and it becomes clear who is going to do what. Clubs without an explicit policy function well, but a policy can be of help to elucidate the aims of the club to everyone and to get more unity in the functioning of the club, especially the clubs which do not function so fluently. The policy can also be helpful to parents in order to get a profile of the club and in order to explain that contact with the parents is wished for.

The directors

The directors indicated that the interest of the parents is decreasing. For younger children the interest is higher, only the directors suspect this can be explained by the fact that young children have to be taken to the club. Of course there are a few exceptions of parents who always come to watch.

What is the reason? Maybe parents have less time because they both work. There is

little free time left so their priorities are elsewhere. Interest in sports in general will certainly influence the participation level of parents. Enthusiastic parents stimulate their children a lot to practice sports (Smoll, 1988). Maybe the club should give more publicity to the parents for important competitions and other events. This might have an indirect impact on the keeping of youth members. Caution is advised in attracting parents of adolescent children, because these children are developing their own identity and are disconnecting themselves from their parents (Abma, 1990).

In general the parents are not considered important factors who need extra attention. Only a few clubs conduct an active policy regarding relations improvement.

Almost all clubs are into executive recruitment. The directors indicate that a personal approach is the best way. No advertisement posters or approaching people as activities occur. Parents are active within the club at different levels. They are very flexible, depending on their capabilities. It seems that directors know little about the parents and their capacities. Clubs could make an inventory of functions, requirements and people available.

Coaches

Coaches are the intermediaries between parents and the management of the club. Maybe he/she is the right person to improve the relationship between them. According to the interviewed coaches any help from parents is welcome. The actual parent participation seems to be limited to tasks that can be considered as marginal conditions of the sports practice. Technical tasks are taken up less. For these tasks a large knowledge of the sport is required. Clubs can work on this, e.g. by organizing game-rules evenings or open-training sessions so parents can get acquainted with the sport.

The coaches appreciate all the help of parents. So the relationship between clubs and parents seems to be good. In an earlier publication (De Knop, 1992) we however indicated that sometimes parents are not welcome, but in this project the negative image of parents is rejected. The contact is almost always pleasant and there is some kind of interaction.

Parents

It should be noted that the parents were selected by the directors. This way the parents interviewed were those who knew the directors and who could often be found in the club, but did not have any actual function. Caution is advised in generalizing the results to all parents.

The interviews showed that these parents do not just drop their children at the club. There are always exceptions. These parents show an interest in the sport practise of their children and the club. Sport for their children is important to them for different reasons: health, social contact, social education and fun. It is important not only to stress the extrinsic value of sport, but also the intrinsic value (fun) because it is of great importance for youth.

Parents think that a good youth programme is important. This means that the coaches are good with children. De Knop (1992) indicates that motivating youth is the most important task of the youth coach. The coaching and teaching are less important tasks. For the parents it is most important that the child has fun in the sports club.

The interviewed parents are prepared to do things for the club when that is required. This should be little tasks that consume little time. Parents often feel more or less obliged to do something for the club, especially when they see they are not the only parents who participate in club matters. The club can take advantage of this and distribute all kinds of tasks among the parents, e.g. driving, setting up and clearing up the gear used during training sessions and competitions, canteen service, etc. The club must make a list of tasks and names so the parents know what to do and when.

Parents are less inclined to take on larger tasks. They feel they do not have the knowledge and therefore do not want to do any technical and/or executive tasks. Clubs should make a clear task description for each task within the club so that volunteers know what is expected.

Parents are indeed interested in the club. They want to be kept informed about what is happening. Most clubs fail in this. A club

policy can be a good way of informing the parents at the beginning. It shows how selections are made, what is done during the season outside the training sessions, the rules within the club, what is expected of the club members and of the parents of youth members. Parents want to be informed on how their children are doing. The coach is the ideal person to provide this information. At first the coach must contact the parents. Afterwards parents must be able to approach the coach with questions. Information must be provided regularly, so that parents know what is going to happen. This way the parents feel they are also part of the club.

Conclusion

With regard to the questions asked in the beginning of the project "*What is the relationship between the sports club and the family at this moment ?*" and "*How can this relationship be enhanced and improved?*" the following can be stated.

The directors complain about the devotion and interest of parents. However, only few clubs are actually doing something to

improve the relationship. We believe that by starting from a good relationship and a good bond with parents goodwill will be fostered which can be determinant for the completion of certain tasks. In the relationship between the sports club and the parents the coach has a special place. In the first instance he can nurture a good contact because he meets the parents most often. By spontaneously approaching the parents and informing them on the progress of their child the basis can be laid for a good understanding between the parents and the sports club. This can be a starting point for further cooperation with parents within the club. In the first place parents want to be kept informed about what is going on within the club. A lot of clubs do not provide any information. A good information interaction with the parents can make them feel more involved in the club and then they will be prepared to do something for the club. Parents indicated feeling more or less obligated to help. It is the task of the club to ensure that parents can do things. The club must analyze and define the tasks so that the potential volunteers know what to do.

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